

CHAPTER 3

STEPHEN BAMBURY

>AT THE WALL

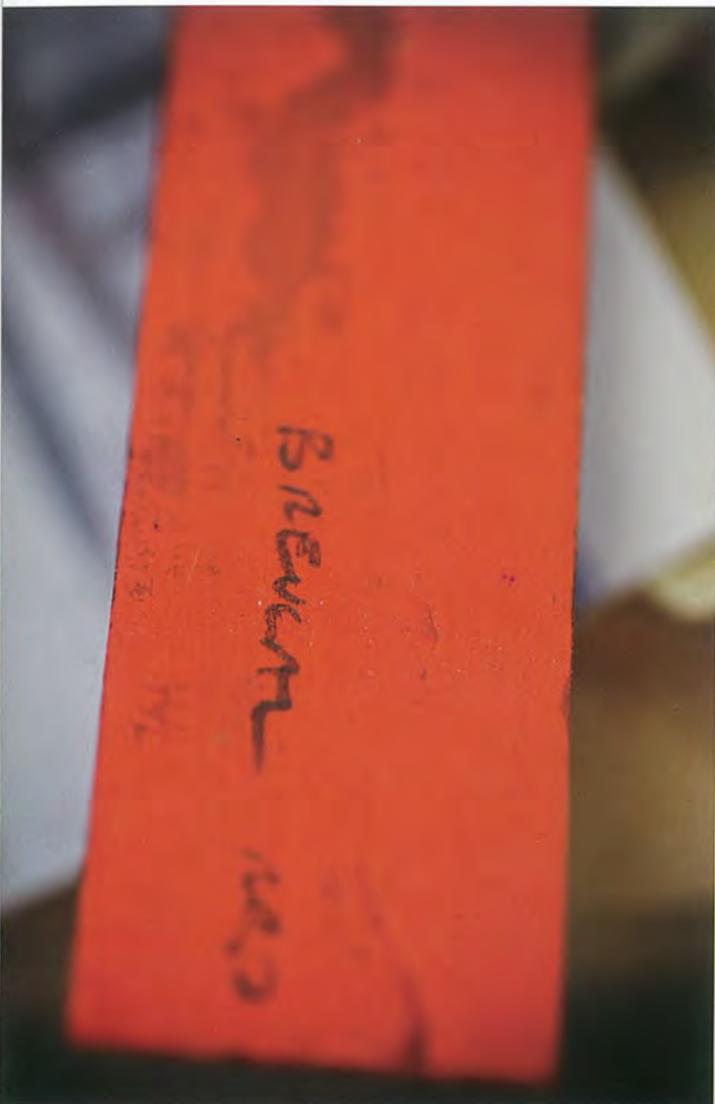
IN 1992, AFTER LIVING and working in France for almost three years, Stephen Bambury returned to Auckland and went looking for a new studio. He found suitable premises in Eden Terrace, previously home to a metal fabricator and a clothing manufacturer. With some 560 square metres spread over two floors, it offered plenty of space for the various aspects of his practice, as well as flexibility, privacy and natural light. Bambury observes: 'I spend more than half my life here so I wanted it to be pleasurable ... [In the morning] I go up the road, read for half an hour with my coffee, and work till 7 or 7.30 every day. I try not to go in on weekends but it doesn't always work out like that.'

For Bambury, the studio and its associated equipment offer a sense of independence: 'Tools and space are a way to liberate you.' For example, he now has the means of cutting up sheets of aluminum—his preferred painting surface—and no longer needs to send them out. He uses a special German saw: 'It took a long time to find that technology, but basically that saw changed my life.' As part of the next stage in his process, he has a colour room with some 150 handpainted swatches on the wall, a number that is constantly growing: 'I discovered a new black a couple of days ago'. Each colour has a code: 'When someone says "red" I start to tumble in my head through about 20 different kinds of reds.' He refers to Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's studies of colour and its complexities of opacity, translucency and transparency.

A recent addition to Bambury's practice is screenprinting. He didn't study the technique while at the Elam School of Fine Arts (where he graduated in 1975), but recently did a course at Auckland's Artstation. For him, screenprinting and painting 'just kind of came together', the one discipline providing information for the other. After spending 35 years doing 'one of everything', being able to produce an edition of 20 of the same thing seemed like 'pure magic', as well as being another means of getting images and material 'out there'. But while screenprinting allows Bambury to move away from the idea of the unique object, he still likes to individualise his prints with other elements, such as date stamps, which can be considered part of the composition.

Bambury is currently preparing for an exhibition whose title *The Painting is at the Wall* refers to the French *Le Tableau au Mur*. He explains: 'The painting is not *on* the wall in French, it's *at* the wall, and for me the painting is not complete until it is installed.' He is investigating the manner in which a painting enlarges the wall, and what happens in the gap between. He refers to a test panel: 'How do I want it to be? Where is it at the wall? Does it touch the wall?' This line of inquiry grew out of Bambury's earlier use of canvas: 'I got so dissatisfied with stretching canvas across armatures





"When someone says 'red' I start to tumble in my head through about 20 different kinds of reds."

and I thought, what is this? I always felt like I was hiding something.' Now, the inquisitive viewer is able to inspect the backs of Bambury's paintings: all is revealed.

At present he is dealing with an idea that goes back some 15 years, and likens the evolution of thought to an elliptical spiral: 'There's a pulse—and it's to do with about seven years—I find myself crossing over the same points.' He finds ideas re-presenting themselves in a new form: 'I'm really completely uninterested in good ideas. All you want is to attend to the work. Then it has its own organic growth. You just fertilise it. The good idea behind the work is I've got to do it. It's not a case of coming up with an idea and illustrating it... I'm here because I don't know what I'm doing, and I *love* it like that... I want to extend that anxiety for as long as I can. Part of the trick of learning to be by yourself and be in the studio is to understand solitude, and to be happy in that space of discomfort... The studio is a critical place and my view is that it reflects the work. I challenge myself with the space, so I challenge myself with the work.'

During the conversion of the premises Bambury briefed his architect: 'I wanted to feel as if I was in a garden, so I could paint with the organic light, I want it to fade, I want it to get bright, I want it to get dull in winter... but I need to feel as though I'm in the world, not in a room.' Rooflights provide ample changing natural light to assist his exploration of colour, and for obvious reasons he doesn't paint at night. 'There's a really strong sense of how I want the light to hit [the painting]—do I want to take you in? Does it hold you out while something else skims across the top of it? In his studio,

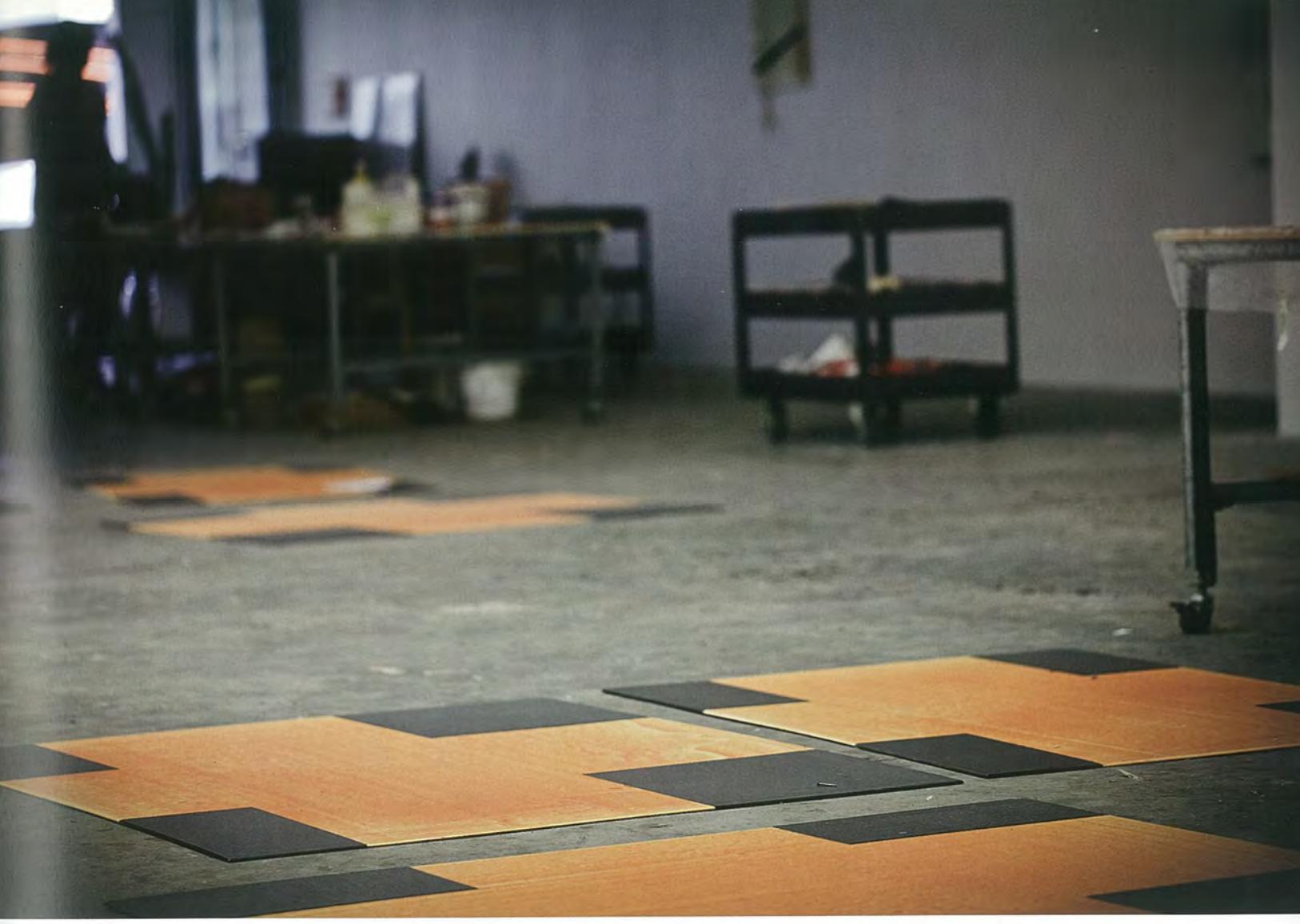




colour is a variable, as opposed to the art gallery where 'art is interrogated in an unchanging light.'

An inspection of Bambury's paintings confirms his intent: 'I have no interest in making a perfect-looking painting with a perfect uniform surface.' His surfaces are a record of human activity: 'I'll paint with my hands if I have to. Often the hands get into the paintings... just to round the way the paint touches something...' His paint can be thick, even trowelled on, and is mixed from commercial polymers. He doesn't use paint from the tube: 'You look at a tube of paint in an art shop—it's already finished, it's extinguished.' Mixing is done in plastic (ex-petfood) containers, and when sealed with cling film it remains workable for the duration of a painting.

Bambury also exploits chemistry to produce organic surfaces—or patinas—on aluminium, copper and brass panels. He regards anodising as an aspect of painting rather than sculpture, and equivalent to a pigment, and hence his intentional description of his materials as 'acrylic and [as opposed to "on"] anodised aluminium.' Anodising is an electrolytic process involving dipping, which requires careful pre-planning. It offers Bambury a pigment with its own distinctive colour, reflectivity and feel, and while it is easily scratched, he also appreciates it for its sense of 'industrial robustness'.



"I got so dissatisfied with pulling canvas across armatures and I thought, what is this? I always felt like I was hiding something..."

In Bambury's paintings lines overlap or don't quite meet, and he suggests 'a lot of expression can take place at that point'. At Elam, his teacher Alberto Garcia-Alvarez suggested his painting was all about that particular spot. At the time Bambury thought this would not leave him a lot to work with. But far from it, for he continues to explore this area of contact, or overlap: 'Do they sit in front, do they sit behind, do they touch, do they push past each other, etc? There's a lot of action in my painting at those points.' He likens his painted panels to tectonic plates, and while admitting speculation can be dangerous, he wonders if he might attempt 'a kind of tectonic overlapping'. Appropriately perhaps for an artist operating on the Pacific rim, on that day—19 October 2009—there were two significant earthquakes in the region, near Vanuatu and Apia.

A lot of changes can occur during the production of a painting, a variability which Bambury welcomes: 'The painting always reflects a whole range of decisions, about the thickness of the pigment, how it's applied, what it's applied with, what the colour is, what the surface is like—flat or reflecting the light... so [there's] a huge range of decisions every time I do something within the mould, if you like. What I love about the idea of moulds is that every time you cast something,



"I have no interest in making a perfect-looking painting with a perfect uniform surface."

it comes out slightly differently.' And while Bambury hasn't exactly broken the mould, he detects an increasing amount of latitude. He finds himself going back to ideas that he 'circled through seven years ago, 14 years ago, 28 years ago—that elliptical spiral again—and of course you always come back into a different place'. There are differences, and while some viewers suggest he's been there before, 'the answer's always yes and no'.

As a student Bambury painted mainly on canvas, and on shaped armatures that he made himself. He regarded the nature of those often-complex forms as a vital component of the painting, in line with American sculptor Donald Judd's idea of a 'specific object'. Bambury is producing paintings, not sculptural installations, but being mindful of such notions he is keen to find new ways of testing the limits: 'I'm looking at something else at the moment which is both very light and stable—it might allow me to push things way out into the space. So the aluminium brought in a certain range of potentials and possibilities, and I just go on looking at other materials to see what's out there.'



Bambury's process begins with the form, currently a panel of aluminium. Then, 'At a certain point all of that's left behind, and I take the brush and do the painting. I may not even need a brush—it could simply be made out of anodised metal.' He explains: 'I'm not trying to express an idea, I'm trying to make a painting—that's all I'm trying to do'. It's a mutual arrangement between artist and idea: 'We're trying to discover each other', a quest that was the subject of an earlier exhibition, 'Blind Painting /Painting Blind'. It's a voyage of (self) discovery: 'I'm aware that I'm plodding through this dark space, trying to find something, as much as it's trying to find me.' If Bambury has his doubts about one of his works, he derives satisfaction from the fact it leads him to the next one: 'There is nothing I love more than being back in the valley of doubt.'

Bambury is interested in what he terms 'porousness', the ability of a painting to interact with, rather than being hermetically sealed from, its surroundings. That affinity with the environment is all part of his ongoing investigation into the business of being 'at the wall'.